

# The Miami Herald

## St. Thomas University rugby team beats big-name schools, wins state championship



By Walter Villa  
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St. Thomas University Bobcats men's rugby coach Gavin McLeavy warned that a phone interview with one of his players on the bus ride back from a joyous championship win might be rowdy and therefore difficult.

In fact, McLeavy - who is from England - explained the predicament in a way that immediately made sense.

"We're a rugby team, mate," McLeavy said.

But the Bobcats are not just a rugby team.

They're a really good rugby team, mate.

The Bobcats (11-0) proved that on Saturday in Bradenton, beating the Florida Gators, 30-24, to win the Division I-AA state title (as officiated by USA Rugby, the sport's governing body).

STU started its program in the fall of 2022, becoming the first Florida university or college to field a rugby team as a scholarship sport.

"In our first season (2023), we had 10 guys on scholarship," McLeavy said, "and 10 walk-ons who had never seen a rugby ball before."

Team captain Jehron McGee is one of those scholarship players.

"I've taken on a leadership role, helping out our newer players," said McGee, a senior who has been at STU since the program started. "I feel like a coach at times, and that has helped me understand the game better."

Thanks to players such as McGee, the Bobcats won the Division II state title last season, going 7-1 and beating Eckerd, 23-20, in the final.

That earned the Bobcats a promotion to Division I-AA for this year, and STU responded by beating a bunch of big-name schools in the

regular season, including Florida State, Florida, UCF, USF, FIU, Florida Atlantic and North Florida. (Rugby is a club sport at all those schools.)

In the playoffs, Florida State lost by forfeit, not wanting to make the trip to Miami Gardens to play the Bobcats, according to McLeavy.

That set STU up for the win over the Gators.

"Massive respect for UF," McLeavy said. "Their coach, Ken Simmons, made me nervous. He's a legend."

Next up, the Bobcats - who now have 40 players on their evolving roster -- have more yet to accomplish this season.

On May 4, the Bobcats will travel to Houston to play a bowl game against Air Force, a Division IA team.

"We want to play at the D-1A level next year," McLeavy said. "That's the national level against schools such as Penn State, Cal and UCLA.

"Playing Air Force is the next step."

McGee, the Bobcats' captain and a transfer from the D-1A ranks, said he has delighted in beating the likes of Florida and Florida State this season.

"Our team is made up of mostly freshmen and sophomores," McGee said, "and we're beating up on a bunch of 22-year-olds."

And if that quote is too provocative - remember, the coach did issue a pre-interview warning.

"We're a rugby team, mate."